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Interview with Regina White, and Morrison at A Taste of Country

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ELFS-LKS-F021901.A

Accession number: ELFS-LKS-F021901.A

Researcher's name: Leah Sokolofski

Event: Interview with Regina White, and Morrison at A Taste of Country

Place: A Taste of Country, Fredericktown, OH

Co-workers present: Erin Molnar

Counter: 000

Leah Sokolofski: This is Leah Sokolofski and Erin Molnar talking with Regina White and Elaine Morrison at A Taste of Country, bulk foods store in Fredericktown, Ohio. And the accession number for this tape is ELFS-LKS-F021901.A. Ok, just a few questions.

Erin Molnar: Just to start, what would be your description of the store.

Regina White: A place where hopefully people can come and buy bulk foods cheaper than prepackaged foods like at a regular grocery store. We try to keep our prices as low as we can.

Elaine Morrison: We get items in like 100 pound bags and we reduce them down. It's just cheaper that way.

RW: We do have some organic things and we have some products that are wheat-free and gluten-free for the people who are allergic to wheat and gluten.

EKM: What prompted opening the store, especially in terms of what did you think, what community need did you think the store would be filling?

RW: [laughs]

EM: It was just something that Gina wanted to do.

RW: We both had always went to bulk food stores and I mean, there's a lot of people that did go to bulk food stores. There are a lot of people who come in here that say that they go to Berlin or Holmes County and now this is a lot closer. It's just something that I always [laughs]....

LS: Is there another bulk foods store in the county, or is the only one?

EM: There's one in Nunda.

Counter: 020

RW: Nunda, there's Country Lane. It's run by Amish and...

EM: There's one out by Waterford.

RW: Yeah, that's run by Amish...

EM: Smaller...

RW: Yeah, smaller....

LS: But this location is probably convenient for people?

RW: Yeah, I think so. Because we only have one grocery store in town and for people to go to Nunda, which is not that far, but it is way, out in the country a ways and it's kind of hard to find, I guess. It's on a lot of backroads. And the one up here, somewhere out by Waterford, I don't even know where that one's at. Hopefully it's convenient being right downtown, across from the bank.

EKM: What kind of clientele do you serve? Is it mostly family-type customers, people who back, or...

EM: It's pretty much a little bit of everything. We get a lot of bakers, but then we get a lot of people just come in for meat and cheese for the week for their lunches too. So, it's a little bit of everything.

LS: How do you choose what products to sell?

RW: A lot goes on what people ask for. They'll come in and ask if we can get this or that and we normally, a lot of order is what people, we're always getting in new items and it's what people request. Then we try to have the everyday things too.

LS: Have you seen any distinct shifts, like you mentioned the gluten-free products and the organic, since you started to what you have now? Is there a clear interest that people have?

RW: Well, a lot of people are kind of, I guess, trying to get away from the processed.

EM: They want more of the whole flour, whole brown flour.

RW: Natural. Like with eggs, they want them off the farm. They don't want them to be gone through the process of the, I guess, factory. I don't know what you want to call that, but they want them natural. They want them, try to go back to the basics, I guess, is what people are trying to do. More health-conscious.

LS: Have you, I know you mentioned that you sell some of the Rickard's meat, is that sort of in response to that? People wanting things more natural or straight from the farm.

RW: Yeah, because they had sold their meat at the farmer's market in Mt Vernon and they got a lot of response from that because there's not any antibiotics. There's no chemicals in the feed; they do all natural grazing. And we're going to see some of our own beef, because it's locally raised and you don't have to worry about any diseases. You know, like, the mad cow disease, that France, or wherever is worrying about. People kind of like things to be local, so they know that, "well, this came from the farm over here" and like to keep things more locally grown. Like with the produce, we've had people ask for locally grown, you know, all different produces for the summer. And honey and maple syrup. And trying to get back to the basics instead of all the processed and chemical stuff.

LS: And then, you mentioned your own cattle, do you just take it to DJ's or someplace?

RW: Yeah, we have to take it to somewhere that is inspected, like DJ's, and there will be a state inspector there and we have to have a certain label that says the weight, where it was packaged at, our name and address on it, and how to prepare it. It has to go, we can't just take it to any processor, it has to be state inspected.

LS: Is that kind of exciting for you, to be able to sell your own meat in your own store?

Counter: 060

RW: Yeah, because we know what goes into those cattle. We know that there's not a bunch of chemicals and all that in, and we know that it's good safe meat. You don't have to worry about diseases in it, or... Especially, like anything that gets imported in, you don't know what another country's regulations are compared to ours.

LS: Where else might you be able to sell that?

RW: Our meat?

LS: Yeah...

RW: We could take it to the farmer's market, or something like that, that we don't have time to do that, so we'll just sell it in here. But the Rickards, they do it at the farmer's market and they even have a home-delivery system now too.

LS: I think I've seen a flyer around town for that.

RW: They sell quite a bit of it.

LS: Do you know what people did prior to the farmer's market? Because the farmer's market is kind of new, right? It's opened up only in the last year, last summer.

RW: I think there was just a lot of demand for locally grown produce. You go to the grocery store to buy it and it's expensive. And you don't know where it came from; it's shipped in. And this way, it's all from Knox County.

LS: And getting the local foods, is it cheaper for you, as a business, to get those local foods as opposed to getting, maybe... Can you get those same products that you get locally in bulk?

RW: Like vegetable and stuff?

LS: Yeah.

RW: I hope. Because this is going to be our first summer at it too. And we're going to raise a garden. We always raise a garden and so we'll just plant a little bit extra – tomatoes and stuff to bring in. There's a farmer, I don't know what road it is, Montgomery, I think, that has a blueberry farm. He has all different kinds of blueberries and we told him to come in, so we'll buy from him. There's several people down here that do maple syrup. Now we have to find somebody that does honey. We don't know of anybody that does honey yet. We're hoping that there's enough there.

LS: I'm trying to think, who does honey? I think we met someone who, was it the Browns?

RW: Browns do maple syrup.

LS: Oh, they do maple syrup, but they don't do honey.

EKM: I feel like we did meet someone who did honey.

LS: I know there, I think there was a beekeeper's association, or something.

RW: If you happen to come across...

LS: I'll let you know, for sure. We've been scouting out people who sell stuff and where they sell it, because I think it's hard. That's one of the things that we're talking about is that it's hard because there aren't a lot of markets for local foods.

RW: I like the farmer's market, it's great for that. But there's going to be so many new regulations and stuff this year too. Like, we can't, after March 1, we can't sell eggs right off the farm without the farm being inspected. New regulations. So now, we're either going to hope that who we buy eggs off of will get inspected or I have chickens and Elaine has chickens, so we'll try to get one of our farms inspected and have more chickens so we can have eggs for in here. So, we're trying to find out what that entails, you know, what is all involved in getting your farm inspected to do that.

LS: And that's probably costly too.

Counter: 100

RW: I don't know. We don't know. The county inspector was just in Friday and told us this and so, we haven't called to talk to the ag department yet. We want to because we want to keep some farm eggs in here.

EKM: If a farmer or someone else has something that they wanted to sell, could they just approach you and work it out?

RW: They have to be inspected. Just like to get maple syrup from the Browns, they have to be inspected now. They whole, everything's changed, after the first of March, everything's changing. So we can't just, you can't just say, "Hey, I've got chickens, do you want to buy some?" You have to get inspected.

EKM: Are there new regulations for produce or fruit?

RW: The produce and fruit, no. There's not any for that. Just like the eggs and, I don't know why honey, or I don't know about honey, but I know about maple syrup and stuff. I don't know why they have to be inspected. Well, it would be processed is why.

LS: So all things that are processed.

RW: Anything that's processed. Because we can, I asked the inspector, if somebody came in selling sweet corn, could we buy it? She said, yeah, because it's not processed. And I don't know if honey is processed or not. So I don't know if that would be an inspection too, or...

LS: Ok, how do you see a store like A Taste of Country, bulk foods, fitting into, I guess, how food, the economic distribution of food or the food system in the county, how does it fit into that big picture?

RW: [laughs]

LS: It's a big question. [laughs] It's a twenty-thousand dollar question.

RW: Yeah. You mean for like...

LS: I guess, what role does it play in the community or in, or sort of in the economic community? Sort of, how people spend their money?

EKM: Where they choose to buy, what they choose to buy.

RW: I know we've had people come in and say that they save, one lady came in and, she's a regular weekly customer, she buys her lunch meat and cheese in here for their school lunches and for her husbands lunch and stuff. And I think she was saying that she saves like ten bucks a week by buying her meats and cheeses in here because we have such lower prices than a regular grocery store. And I don't know if that's because they have such, so much more overhead and employees or what. So we hope that we're saving people money, you know. I don't know what else to say.

LS: It's you and Elaine, and does anyone else – I think that I've come in here once and saw someone else working.

RW: A friend of ours helps us out when one of us needs a day off or something. She just comes in and she just – she's retired so she likes to come in and help us out. It's fun for us though, it gives us a break.

LS: So, there aren't many costs for...

RW: Right, it's just the two of us.

LS: Well, was it difficult to set up the store? In terms of getting loans or things like that?

Counter: 140

RW: No, we basically just used money that we had. Or we had a zero percent credit card for six months and that was cheaper than going to a bank. Because the bank loan was like ten percent. So when that credit card is going to expire, the zero percent, we'll change to another one until it's paid off. We're working to pay off any big debt – you know, we're not taking a penny out for ourselves yet. We're waiting until everything's paid off and then we'll start taking a paycheck. That way we don't have to have our prices as high and we're both dairy farmers so we have other income.

LS: That's great though, that it's still feasible for you to start this up.

RW: And it was difficult ordering, to know what to order. We spent a lot of time deciding what to order for the store when we first started.

EM: That was horrible. That was bad. That was hard.

RW: Because we knew what we liked, but we didn't, you know, you had to buy for everybody. Try to figure out what everybody else liked. That was probably the hardest thing, was to figure out what to put in the store.

EM: And then to bag it up, to get ready for the store.

LS: Would you get suggestions from people, from friends?

RW: On what to order?

LS: On what to order.

RW: Yeah, oh yeah. We had anybody that we knew, what do you buy? When you go to the bulk foods store in Holmes County, what do you go there for? And the Rickards were a big help because they always went to bulk food stores in Holmes County. And they would go once a month and they would buy everything that they needed for the month. So they were a big help. And my mom and dad have always went to bulk food stores, so they kind of helped too. So, we ordered what we liked and what we knew we would have a lot of people, maybe Amish, buying bulk. We didn't know there were so many different flours. [laughs] I think we have twenty different flours out there. You know, it's a learning experience too. We've learned so much and then all the people that come in, I didn't realize that there was that many people allergic to wheat. There's tons of people allergic to wheat and they come in and ask if we can get different products and we sent away to a company and got a great big box. I think we got three boxes that big [points to a box against the wall] of just free samples of just wheat free products. So when people come in and they say that they're allergic to wheat, they just found out, or whatever, we give them samples. Actually, it's cheaper for them to order from the company than through us because we have to pay weight-wise and they can order just one item. We have a limit how much we have to order and they can order one or two things. So, we're trying to get samples out there to people, because that would be terrible. There's people who come in here and the one guy, he almost died from it. Finding out, he's probably in his late thirties, and he just found out a few years ago that he was allergic to it. And he almost died and now he's on such a strict diet, you know, no pasta, no breads or anything like that. Anything with wheat in it. It would be something hard to get used to, change in your diet.

LS: Do you just work through one distributor, or do you order from a bunch of different companies?

RW: We have two major distributors right now. Walnut Creek foods from Walnut Creek in Holmes County and then Dutch Valley from Pennsylvania. And all of our meat and cheeses come from Walnut Creek and we get some other stuff from them. Mostly, this order right here is all from Pennsylvania, Dutch Valley. We just use the two right now, it's just easier, to keep it down to a couple if you can.

LS: And they're still pretty close.

RW: Yeah, especially Walnut Creek. If you needed something. And we have a salesman that stops in every week from there. So, he's really good. He gives us a lot of ideas and stuff too.

EKM: These are slightly off topic questions, but I was just curious about – my specific topic is food markets. And I was curious, you mentioned that there was one grocery store in town. Is that a big grocery store?

RW: No. It's Taylor's, Supervalu. It's just, I don't know which way you guys came in, down...

LS: We came in off of 3?

RW: 13?

LS: 13. I'm still learning my roads.

[Laughter]

RW: If you just go straight, if you just go out of here and go left and go straight, it's just around the corner.

EKM: Is that where most people in the area do their shopping? Or do they often go into Mt Vernon to Big Bear or Kroger's?

Counter: 200

RW: Yeah, I think a lot of the older people shop local because it's close for them. I know there's a lot of people who go to Sam's, that come in and say that they go to Sam's. I'm sure Kroger and Big Bear. But Taylor's is always busy, so there's a lot of people locally who do shop there.

EKM: Is there anything that you would like to add to the store, as it continues to grow, specifically?

RW: Yeah, we need a, we want to get milk in here yet. And we just don't have a cooler yet for it. We want to get a couple, in that one freezer, we want to get upright glass front freezers. It's a lot easier to see things and to get into it. We're always getting new items in, so we're probably going to need more shelving and you know, more cooler space. Our meat and cheese deli case, when we first got it, we didn't know how we were going to fill it and now we're running out of room. Just because people ask, "Can you get this meat or this cheese?" And we get it in and we're just getting cramped on space that way.

LS: Do you think people like just knowing you and feel comfortable asking you if you can get something in as opposed to... Do you think that people like that shopping experience, maybe more than going into Kroger, where it's hard to ask for something?

RW: I think so. Because they know that Elaine and I are the owners and that we're here all the time. And when we first opened we put up a suggestion box and we're always telling people, if there's something that you can't find, let us know and we'll try to get it for you. And, I think being comfortable with us means a lot too, getting to know us. I've only lived here in Fredericktown for nine years, around Fredericktown. Elaine's from Butler, which isn't very far away, so she knows quite a few people too, coming into here.

EKM: I don't have any more questions.

LS: Yeah, I don't really either. Is there anything else that you guys would like to add or share with us?

LS: Oh, I remember one last thing. If you got milk, could you get stuff from your farms?

RW: No. Because it's not pasteurized.

LS: Could you get it from, so then when it goes through the pasteurization – is that the right word – process, could you buy it from whoever does that?

EM: We could buy it from Smith's and stuff like that and resell it. We just don't have any place to put it or we would have milk.

RW: Yeah, she asked if there was anything that we wanted to add and I said coolers for milk. We tried putting milk in the Pepsi cooler and it didn't work. The Pepsi man got very upset with us. That didn't work too well.

EM: It worked for like ten minutes and then he walked in. Believe it or not.

RW: He had a fit.

LS: Thank you so much. This has been great.

EKM: Thank you.